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## Birds & Language

Wollongong Art Gallery  
Preview **ANDREW GAYNOR**

MADELEINE KELLY IS AN ARTIST, CURATOR AND AVID BIRDWATCHER. SHE HAS NOW EXPANDED THIS INTEREST THROUGH THE EXHIBITION *BIRDS AND LANGUAGE*, OPENING AT THE WOLLONGONG ART GALLERY IN NOVEMBER.

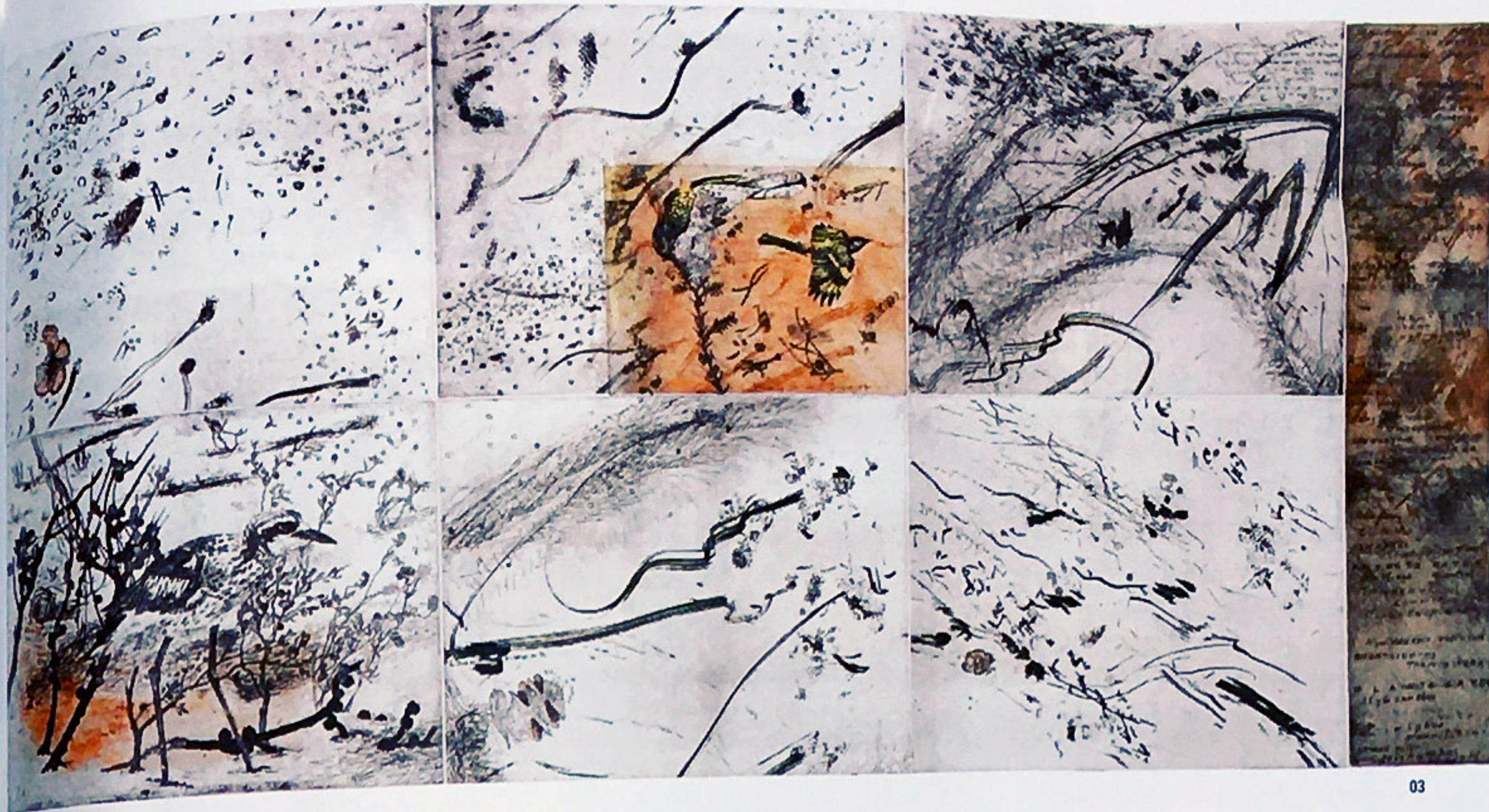
Wollongong derives its name for the local Dharawal word “Woolungah,” and the city’s Gallery is an apt venue for the exhibition *Birds & Language* given its location at the head of the long, narrow coastal strip of Illawarra, which supports some 350 bird species. Unfortunately, timber-felling in the region was an early industry of such rapacity that it was already winding down by the 1840s, having removed all the suitable trees in the previous two decades. The loss of native bird habitat was immense and it is sobering to note a similar decline in the forests’ original caretakers, from 3,000 in 1820 to a shameful ninety-eight persons by 1846. This reference is relevant because the corresponding impact of colonial erasure was so thorough that few Australian

birds retain their original Indigenous names. Those that do remain reveal a wonderful spirit of onomatopoeia, with notable examples being kookaburra (*gugurrgaagaa*), boo book (*bubuk*), and gang gang. Of the rest, many were simply saddled with European equivalents due to the subjects’ incidental similarity, such as the magpie, robin or wren; though as author Ian Fraser wisely notes, “names are a human conceit; the birds remain unconcerned.” With the resultant cultural baggage, obfuscation and outright erasure, *Birds & Language* thus becomes a well-justified and timely exploration.

Surviving work related to birds by Dharawal artists appears scarce at best, so Kelly has selected four Indigenous practitioners from other areas of Australia.

Bark paintings by Djawida Nadjongorle (Kunwinjku, Western Arnhem land) and Bilinyarra Nabegeyo (also Kunwinjku) employ intricate cross-hatching to reveal the anatomy of an emu and a brolga, markings which are also symbolic of knowledge and Country. Marie Celine Porkalari’s carved pelican highlights the important place that birds have within Tiwi culture. Referred to as Tokwampuwi, these are mortal beings – witnesses, law makers and informers – whose very presence is a coded form of communication. Danie Mellor (Ngadjon/Mamu, far north Queensland) addresses loss of language, culture and habitat in the meticulous watercolour *Marri diramu: balam dugurra*, 2016, centring on a large “birthing tree” set within verdant rainforest, but reduced to the Wedgewood





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blue-and-white palette familiar to the invaders. Occupying the vegetation – and in contrasting full colour – are members of the original people whilst the canopy is alive with parrots and cockatoos.

John Wolseley spends much of his creative life close to the land and his idiosyncratic, happily rambling notations of the natural world are well known. In *The Slender-leaf mallee, Desert banksia, Scrub casuarina, the Willaroo and the last of the Regent honeyeaters*, 2004, Wolseley employs etching to full advantage, mimicking the marks and scratches of bird trails, and also includes his version of a “sonogram” or graphic representation of a honeyeater’s call. This takes on particular resonance with the recent news that in the absence of mature adults, juvenile Regent Honeyeaters are becoming unable to learn their own language. Humans are, of course, also ignorant to what birds are actually saying, but Eugene Carchesio makes a committed attempt with vivid watercolours of individual birds accompanied by geometric patterns inspired by their rich plumage. Presiding over her own wall of symbolic language is Emily Floyd’s wise *Owl of Minerva*, 2019, who, as every reader of *Winnie-the-Pooh* knows, is the best equipped bird for inter-species written communication. Others – Fernando Do Campo, Barbara Campbell and Raquel Ormella – tackle the taxonomy of birds, incorporating bird names and text to show both the possibilities and

the limitations of human language when applied to birds. Indeed, Joan Ross takes this one step further and beheads her birds, a mute reminder that taxonomy is closely aligned with taxidermy thus becoming “a use of language that slaughters.”

Inevitably, stuffed birds do appear in the exhibition but are symbolic of larger things than the original subject’s death. A long, unravelling thread runs from a parakeet’s perch in Debra Porch’s *Billy from an archive of ordinary space*, 2017; and Liam Garstang employs a crow looking at its own reflection, as if seeking information beyond its own existence. Another companion is Louise Weaver’s glorious *Golden Snipe*, 2010, where the artist has given the otherwise desiccated corpse a new coat suitable for a festive occasion. Attending a possible avian dance party, the Snipe may unfortunately be the only bird in attendance, with no-one around to react to the blatant “look at me” message being sent out by its sartorial, crocheted and gold-leaf splendour.

Given the brilliance of real bird noises, an exhibition such as *Birds & Language* would be incomplete without audio, so John Tonkin’s and Hollis Taylor’s treated field recordings each round out the experience. Listening via headphones whilst contemplating the surrounding work, the visitor becomes even more attuned to the possibilities suggested by this striking show. It is also worth noting that an associated



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conference and pop-up exhibition (with different artists) was held at Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney, in August this year. ■

#birdsandlanguage

## EXHIBITION

**Birds & Language**  
20 November 2021 – 13 February 2022  
Wollongong Art Gallery, Wollongong

- 01 Danie Mellor, *Marn diramu: balam dugurba*, 2016, mixed media on Saunders Waterford paper with wash, glitter, and Swarovski crystal, 147 x 97 cm
  - 02 Joan Ross, *Fool's Paradise*, 2018, hand-painted digital collage, 113 x 80 cm, edition of 8 plus 2AP
  - 03 John Wolseley, *The Slender-leaf mallee, Desert banksia, Scrub casuarina, the Willaroo and the last of the Regent honeyeaters*, 2004, two coloured etchings with watercolour, 60 x 131 cm, photography by Terence Bogue
  - 04 Emily Floyd, *Owl of Minerva*, 2019, synthetic polymer paint, wood, 30 x 20 x 40 cm, photographed by Dane Lovett
- Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, and Wollongong Art Gallery